

as always

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by [meridies](#)

Summary

It wasn't the first time Dream had been dragged to someone's ridiculously fancy, extravagant, elite ball as arm candy, but it was certainly the most fun.

or, George is filthy rich, Dream is his paid accompaniment, and they work it out, piece by piece.

Notes

prompt for day 1 was "black tie" so here's my take on it. enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It wasn't the first time Dream had been dragged to someone's ridiculously fancy, extravagant, elite ball as arm candy, but it was certainly the most fun.

For one, Dream's outfit had been bought for him: a three piece tuxedo, deep navy blue, with an emerald green tie that complimented his appearance very well. For two, instead of being told to remain perfectly quiet and polite the entire time, his employer had allowed him some breathing room in terms of who he should and shouldn't socialize with. For three, his employer was—

Quite interesting, actually.

More interesting than the previous one, who had barely glanced at him the entire night except to whisper, in harsh, muted words, that he was there as arm candy and nothing more. There, Dream had been quiet and smiling and well aware of the stares he was being given. It was a painful experience, and when it ended, Dream had been glad.

This ball could not have been more different.

“She’s smiling so hard I think her face is going to split.”

“Whoever her plastic surgeon is should be fired.”

“She hasn’t got a single wrinkle.”

“Very impressive for someone of her age.”

“She’s ancient, isn’t she? Do you think they dug her up with the dinosaurs?”

George Reynolds, billionaire that he was, laughed, and showed off that dazzling, trademark smile. “Please don’t tell her that to her face.”

“I’d never,” Dream said sagely. “Only behind her back, of course.”

“Of course,” George repeated. “If you have anything else to say, I’m all ears. There’s only so much politeness you can take.”

Dream smiled and took great pleasure in doling out scathing, sharp reviews of every wealthy person they passed. George appeared to enjoy it. He came fairly close to laughing a few times. Dream thought that he might like to make that happen more.

After all, this job was very enjoyable, at least with this specific employer.

By the time the night ended, Dream had thoroughly exhausted his lengthy repertoire of prepared dialogue to say to people, and George must have been tired from how much he had been smiling and almost laughing at Dream’s muttered comments the entire night. Dream trailed politely behind George as he made the rounds, saying goodbye to a few people, influential figures whose names Dream vaguely recognized from one Forbes magazine list to another. The two of them waited in the cool nighttime air for barely a moment before George’s exquisitely sleek, fancy car pulled to a rolling stop in front of them.

The chauffeur closed the door behind them, and Dream muttered, “Thank God that’s over.”

“I think I had a lot of fun,” George said, and leaned back, “You can take that off, you know.”

He gestured to Dream’s tie, which was still uncomfortably tight. Dream had never been one for formalities.

“Good,” Dream said, and ripped it off. He didn’t care much about whether he wrinkled it or not; it was George’s money, after all, not his— and besides, his paycheck at the end of the night would be beautiful.

“That one’s better than a lot of the others,” George said. “Friendlier people.”

Dream was inclined to agree; at least some people had given him a faint, polite hello, rather than treating him as if he were invisible. Although, in the world of George Reynolds, he might as well be.

“Any plans after this?”

“Sleeping,” Dream said.

George laughed. “Me too.”

He was very nice to talk to, Dream thought. Much more human than any of the other people Dream had been with.

“You know,” George continued, supremely casual, “I’ve another one of these events in a week, if you’d care to come.”

Dream paused. “Are you commissioning me again?”

George winced. “Well, don’t call it that.”

“What else would I call it? Propositioning?”

He frowned. “That’s worse. Think of it as an invitation.”

Dream took in the luxurious upholstery, the limousine driver in the front seat, face sealed away by tinted glass, the way there was a bottle of champagne in the icebox that cost more than Dream’s rent for the month. He looked at the sleek velvet of the car floor and the way his tie, knot undone and discarded like an old wrapper, was crumpled on the floor. It was fine if it was ruined; George surely had enough money to buy ten more just like it.

“I don’t do this for free,” Dream said.

“I would pay you.” He had been, after all. Dream made more from these gigs than his own two jobs. “Same fee?”

Falsely confident: “I’d like a bit more, for such short notice.”

“Hm.”

“Otherwise I’m sure you can find some other tall, attractive blond person to bring with you to these events.”

“Is it so hard to believe that I like your personality as well?”

“If you like it so much, you can pay me an extra thousand dollars.”

“Of course.”

And, because Dream loved to push his luck, added, “*Per hour.*”

George paused, then said, “Of course.”

Well. That settled Dream’s rent, groceries, utilities, and student debt payments for the next three months. All for an entire night of socializing with the richest people in New York City on the arm of just another rich businessman. Dream was a college dropout with seventy thousand dollars in loans working two dead end jobs, but somehow all it took was one carefully flattering conversation and some wit for him to be financially secure for next few months. This truly was an excellent job.

“So when is the event, then?”

“Saturday night,” George said. “Do you have work?”

Dream wanted to laugh. “No.”

“I’ll email you the flight reservations beforehand,” George said, and pulled out his phone, “I assume first class is fine?”

No, I'd prefer economy. “Can’t afford to send me on a private jet?”

George hummed. “You’re an expensive companion, aren’t you?”

There was a cool, reserved silence in which Dream fought the urge to fidget. How far did George’s leniency with his jokes actually go?

“I was joking,” Dream said carefully, when the silence stretched too long for comfort.

George said, “I’m aware,” and nothing more.

The limousine turned onto a dark road, and Dream recognized the chainlink park that bordered his apartment complex. There was the bench that was half falling apart and the streetlight that hadn’t been working since longer than Dream could remember. He saw the all lights in his building off again and grimaced; he hoped the power wasn’t out. It likely was.

Offhandedly, George asked, “Is a private jet something you would prefer?”

He was still on his phone. Dream paused. How do you respond to that?

Carefully: “I’m indifferent.”

“I’ll see you next week, then.”

The car pulled to a stop. The engine hummed quietly, and privately, Dream hoped that everyone in the neighborhood was asleep or otherwise intoxicated, because a limousine would surely attract a lot of attention.

Abruptly, he realized that George was letting him keep the suit. Of course he was.

Dream opened the door, put one foot on the pavement, in those shiny, glossy shoes that hadn’t been worn before George had given them to him, when George said, “Dream?”

“Yes?”

George opened his mouth, then: “Never mind.”

Dream stared blankly. When George said nothing further, he closed the car door. The chauffeur drove away. Dream stayed on the sidewalk, looking at the retreating taillights much longer than was necessary.

The next event was someone’s political fundraiser. In a massive ballroom filled with people of overwhelming name and status, Dream felt positively suffocated. The black bowtie at his throat didn’t help matters either. It was uncomfortably tight around his throat. Every time he swallowed

he felt the way the bowtie pushed against his throat.

He followed George around and reveled in the way that heads turned as the two of them passed. What must it be like, to have that much power and authority and money?

“Isadore,” George said graciously, interrupting Dream’s thoughts. He shook someone’s hand as Dream followed. “It’s so wonderful to see you again.”

Dream had to hand it to him; for someone who was quiet, introverted, and somewhat unsteady when he was alone with him, George was scarily good at melding into an attractive, wealthy socialite when he needed to. It was at times like this when Dream was abruptly aware just how powerful the man on his arm was.

“George,” the woman said throatily, and leaned in to kiss both his cheeks. Dream smiled politely, a decent step away, and when the woman pulled back, Dream returned to his spot at George’s side. The woman gave him a dismissive once over, barely acknowledging his existence, before turning back to George.

Dream managed a convincing smile, pretended to nod along and act interested in their surface level conversation, before George bid her adieu and moved on to the next.

“You know her well?” Dream said, already knowing what his answer would be.

“I know everyone,” George said. “But I do know her better than others. Isadore Remington was in my graduate class.”

“Oh, you went to college?”

“Of course I went to college,” George said, “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Let me guess, you were a trust fund baby who got in because you’re a Harvard legacy.”

“Actually, I went to Oxford,” George said superciliously, “And neither of my parents are Harvard legacies, they both went to Yale.”

Dream sighed. “You realize you just proved my point.”

“That’s not—” George went quiet. “I guess so, huh?”

That startled a laugh out of Dream. “You’re all the same, aren’t you.”

“All?”

Dream gestured. “Rich people.”

“Hm.” George didn’t respond for a long moment, eyes on the movement of the crowd. “Birds of a feather, after all.”

Dream worried that he may have said something wrong, but George didn’t look bothered. “Very true.”

They began a slow, steady roundabout of the ballroom. Dream kept his eyes on the partners walking around, talking easily with one another. Compared to the incessant chatter that he had to endure while George rubbed elbows with the richest of the rich, the silence was positively wonderful.

Con conversationally, George asked, “Where did you go to college?”

Dream replied, “Emerson.”

“That’s a decent school.”

Decent.

“I was going to study creative writing,” Dream said, because that much was true.

“You’re a writer?”

“Was,” Dream corrected. Not any longer.

“You don’t write anymore?”

“There’s nothing to write about,” Dream lied. “And I’ve got work. I don’t have time to sit around like everyone here does.”

George didn’t say anything to that, only raised his champagne flute to his mouth and took a drink. Dream wasn’t sure whether that response appeased him or not.

“What did you do with your degree? Besides this, of course.”

“I dropped out,” Dream said blandly. “After a year.”

George didn’t respond for a while, and Dream was secretly smug that he managed to make George uncomfortably silent. Then George asked, “Why?”

“Working two jobs while being a full time college student isn’t exactly conducive to a healthy lifestyle.”

“Ah.”

George took another sip of champagne, and directed Dream towards an elderly couple, one of them in a suit worth more than Dream’s yearly apartment rent and the other in a deep red dress that screamed conservatism and wealth. It was evident that the two of them came from old money, the type that was respectable, while George was not old money. Dream carefully watched the way the two of them interacted with him, and noticed how George’s smile became only slightly sharper, his words only slightly tighter.

“Who are they?” Dream asked, when they moved away.

“Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,” George answered. “Mr. Elliot is on the Senate ballot for New York.”

“How very interesting,” Dream said sarcastically.

George paused momentarily, and Dream realized that perhaps he needed to watch his mouth a tad more. Then George smiled, as if the two of them were sharing a secret, and said, “They’re not very interesting either.”

Dream laughed. “And do you know them well?”

George shook his head. “I’ve seen them around, of course.”

“I feel like you’ve seen everyone around.”

“Everyone tends to stay with who they know,” George said. “In fact, I’m one of the newcomers here. Let’s go grab an appetizer, why don’t we?”

He steered Dream away from an approaching party, neatly avoiding them, and seized some appetizer off a black plate that a waiter was holding politely. Dream didn’t even recognize the food, but George passed him a small bite of it. At once, Dream understood what George was doing. No one would interrupt them if they were eating. No one would interrupt them if Dream and George were seen talking, as well. George evidently was done with socializing for the night—Dream could tell from the way he looked slightly more tired than usual, from the way his smile was just slightly dimmer than its usual beam.

“Do you want to leave?” Dream said quietly. George paused.

“I didn’t realize I was that obvious about it,” he admitted.

“Well, not to anyone else,” Dream said. “But I’ve spent a lot of time with you this past month, I feel like I know you pretty well.”

“Good to keep that in mind,” George said dryly. “And to answer your question, I’m fine a little longer. There’s just a lot of people in here.”

Dream nodded. That much was true. He could spot a few other people like him, who were perhaps less experienced than he was. A conventionally attractive girl, in a low cut dress and heels, was on the arm of a much older businessman. There was another boy like Dream, on the arm of some movie star or another. There was always a job for people like them. Dream could tell they were new to it, too, because the girl kept glancing up at the columns and up at the glittering chandelier like she expected it to fall at any point. And the boy opened his mouth too much, about to insert himself into conversations where he should have stayed quiet. It was at times like this when Dream wondered why he had begun looking for jobs like this. As anyone who knew him could attest to, Dream was very loud, opinionated, and fervent— perhaps the opposite of what the situation demanded.

Still, this job had brought him George, and Dream appreciated that.

A white hot pain burst over his palm, and Dream yanked his hand away from the milk steamer. He reflexively dropped the cup, and steaming milk splattered all over the counter and the floor, over Dream’s apron and shoes.

“Shit,” Dream hissed, and went to the faucet to stick his hand under cold, running water. It soothed the pain only slightly.

“What the hell?” His coworker skirted past the spill and narrowed their eyes at Dream. “Can you clean this up, please?”

“I’ll get to it,” Dream said impatiently, “Just leave it.”

“I can’t work around this,” his coworker said, and pushed past Dream to grab a coffee cup from under the counter. “Did you burn yourself?”

Dream removed it from the stream of water only for the burn to begin stinging again almost

immediately. “Not really.”

His coworker scowled, rolled his eyes, and moved to the fridges. Dream winced and stuck his hand back under the cold water. He needed to clean up the mess, but his hand ached whenever it was out of the water. He kept it there a while longer and hoped that his two other coworkers on shift were helping out for him.

Dream stared at the dripping mess by the milk steamer and knew he would have to clean it up. Still, his feet felt heavy as lead. It was one of those days where everything felt painfully slow and lethargic.

His manager poked his head out from the back room, saw the milk steamer, and sighed. “Who did this?”

Dream grimaced. “Me. Sorry.”

“Really, Dream?”

“I said sorry, Sean,” Dream said. “Not much else I can do.”

“You could clean it up.”

With his free hand, Dream pointed to his other hand, still cooling off under the running water. “Burnt.”

“There’s band-aids and Neosporin in the back.”

“I’ll get it in a moment.”

Sean came out from the back room and leaned back against the counter. “While you’re waiting, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Dream froze. At any of his previous jobs, hearing those words never boded well.

“I have you slated to work next Friday,” Sean continued. “Are you free then?”

Dream prodded at the reddened burn on his hand and tried not to appear too indecisive. “Probably.”

“Probably doesn’t cut it.”

“I know,” Dream muttered.

“You cancelled your last three shifts without giving a heads up,” Sean said. “I know you’ve worked here a while, but those allowances only go so far.”

“I know,” Dream said faintly, “I know, I know.”

“So can you work next Friday or not?”

Dream swallowed hard. He turned the water off. Carefully, he dried his hand off, taking care not to pull at any of the damaged skin. There were already blisters bubbling to the surface.

“I can,” Dream said, knowing full well that George’s whims were capricious and often unannounced, that he rarely gave Dream a full week’s notice before demanding for him to come along, that if George had a sudden event on Friday that he dragged Dream along to, Dream wouldn’t be able to say no.

“You’re working closing then,” his manager said, and with a pointed look, “If you want to keep working here, you can’t keep cancelling shifts.”

“I know.” He felt sick.

“Now get to it,” he said, and pointed at the milk, dripping off the counter to the tiles, “And try not to make another mess.”

The email arrived late at night, and Dream cursed out loud when he read it.

The subject line was: *event this Friday, need accompaniment*

Dream stared at it for a moment, well aware that if he said no to George, he would be easily replaced. He would lose his greatest source of income— and likely George as well.

Dream was also painfully aware that if he said yes to George, he could wave goodbye to his cozy little job as a barista at the local coffee shop. It would be over.

It took him a long, long moment before Dream responded, and he knew that no matter his answer, he would hate himself for it.

Friday morning, Dream was picked up by George Reynolds’ limousine outside his apartment building and was shuttled by a silent yet polite chauffeur to the Ritz-Carlton downtown. Dream had been there many a time. This was yet another of them.

“Glad you could make it,” George said briskly, and gestured to the closet of the suite the moment Dream entered the door, “Get dressed, we’re on a time limit.”

“Well, you gave me very little warning,” Dream mumbled, but obligingly closed the bathroom door behind him. The tuxedo was pitch black this time, accented with a white, collared undershirt and a black bowtie. It left Dream wondering if he was attending some sort of funeral. He hoped that George would be kind enough to give him notice if he were, though.

Dream smoothed down the slacks, stepped into the pair of shoes, and looked at himself in the mirror. He appreciated the chance to dress up like this; as much as he would have liked to deny it, he loved being among the rich. It was like playing dress-up at an event he would never truly be able to participate in, and he had just as much fun as George did mocking everyone else at their expense.

Dream exited the bathroom, gave George a curious raised eyebrow, and gestured to himself. “Well?”

George didn’t respond immediately. He looked slightly flushed. It was odd, but it made a smug feeling of success swell in Dream’s stomach. Making George speechless was an accomplishment.

George cleared his throat. “As always, Dream.”

Dream hummed, made a show of checking his wristwatch, and said, “Aren’t you on a time limit?”

George blinked, and abruptly dissolved back into his distant, businessman persona. “Of course. Let’s get going.”

The drive there was silent, and Dream watched as the sunset lights of New York City gave way into the velvety blue of upstate New York. Dream was well aware they were likely heading to some family's rich plantation-esque, country club styled home. It was probably for someone's elaborate dinner or birthday celebration, something that would involve much posturing on their part and much discomfort on Dream's part. He would likely stand silently behind George most of the night, offering only the slightest words of encouragement and perhaps scathing, muttered comments about the people there as well. To see if he could make George laugh. Dream thought he might like making George laugh. If there was an occasion.

Blessedly, George took them outside after only an hour. Dream was right—it was someone's birthday celebration, some rich movie star with large, doe eyes and a stellar smile. She hadn't seemed to notice Dream at all— maybe to give him an appreciative up and down, for Dream knew that objectively, he was very attractive— but the perks of “belonging” to George meant that no one could make a move.

The evening breeze was cool on Dream's skin, overheated from the crowded indoors, and he took the moment to unbutton his tuxedo jacket and sling it off. George did the same, and Dream took a spare few seconds to admire the way the man looked in a collared, long sleeved shirt.

“It's exhausting,” George muttered, “Everyone in there.”

“Tell me about it,” Dream said.

“There's a time and a place for socializing,” George continued, “And this is certainly one of them. I'm just never in the mood for it.”

“That's odd, you always seem like you are.”

“Hm?”

“In the mood.”

“This may come as a surprise to you, but I'm actually somewhat of an introvert.”

Dream raised his eyebrows. “That is a surprise, actually.”

“Believe me, it is to most people.”

“You seem so comfortable going out and talking with others,” Dream said. “Really?”

“I am comfortable with it,” George said, “But I'm more of an introvert in the sense that I get my energy from being alone.”

“Me too,” Dream found himself saying. “Although I guess I just get exhausted easily.”

“Mm.” George continued walking, and the pavement under their feet gave way to the smooth, round pebbles of the walking paths through the hedges. “I feel like you have been exhausted recently.”

Dream did his best to smile. “This job is a demanding one.”

“Hopefully not too demanding, though.”

This time, Dream smiled for real. “No, it isn't. It's actually the most fun I've had in ages.”

George smiled faintly. “I'm glad to hear it.”

“You make a lot of things more bearable,” Dream added.

George said nothing, and Dream allowed the silence to wash over him comfortably. Gravel crunched under their feet as they kept moving, away from the yellow light spilling from the dining hall, away from the muted chatter of everyone else. At a point, they came to a fountain lined with pillars, lit up by soft, glowing lamplight. George paused for a moment and looked at the rippling water.

“Do you ever do normal things?” Dream blurted.

George furrowed his brow. “What?”

“Like going to the movies, or seeing friends. People who are *real* friends, not any of this.”

George stared at the water for a long moment, before saying, “I haven’t had much reason, recently.”

“That’s sad.”

“Is it?”

“Do you really spend all your time just working with business and economics all day?”

“Believe it or not,” George said dryly, “That is my job.”

“Well, I think you should get out more,” Dream said. “Maybe one day, you can come with me for one of these things.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes,” Dream said. “You can come with me and I can introduce you to my coworkers. I think they’ll make a fabulous impression.”

George laughed. “Your sarcasm is very telling.”

“Is it now?”

George pushed Dream’s shoulder lightly, and Dream reached up to do the same in return, and George paused.

“What’s this?”

“What?”

“Your hand,” George said. “You’re hurt.”

Dream looked down at his hand. The burn had faded from a few blisters to an oddly smooth patch of skin, still red and raw, that would be healed in a few weeks. “This? It’s nothing.”

“No it’s not.” George grabbed Dream’s hand, fingers warm, and turned his hand this way or that. “That’s a bad burn.”

“It’s fine,” Dream said, and at George’s skeptical glance, insisted, “It really is. I put some Bacitracin on it, took an aspirin, it doesn’t even hurt.”

George stared at his hand for a moment, and Dream vaguely recognized that George still hadn’t let

go of Dream's hand.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Dream said. "Really, it's fine. I promise."

"You promise," George repeated.

Dream nodded. George surveyed him for a long moment— he was still holding Dream's hand— and that was when Dream realized two very important things.

The first was that away from the crowd, in the cool nighttime air, everything was very quiet and still. Around one of the pillars by the fountain, they were sheltered from any prying eyes. No one could see them, and no one was going to come looking for them.

The second was: George was very close. And very, very attractive.

Dream swallowed, heart thumping loudly in his ears, and asked, "What if you kissed me?"

George went perfectly still. "What?"

"What if?" Dream said, heart in his throat. "How bad could it be, right?"

George dropped his hand from Dream's and took a practiced step backwards. "What are you talking about?"

The conversation spiraled. It was too late to take it back.

Fuck it. "What if *I* wanted to kiss *you*?"

George's eyes didn't move from his face, and he repeated, "What?"

"Why not?" Dream continued. "We're both consenting adults."

"But I'm *paying* you."

"What on earth does that have to do with it?"

"You're my employee."

"You're only paying me to sit and look pretty at your side," Dream argued, catching onto what George was saying. "That's not the same."

"Stop being ridiculous," George said.

"I'm not being ridiculous," Dream said, "Come on, Georgie, you're always so uptight."

George liked the nickname, Dream knew. He liked it when Dream flirted just so slightly with him. He liked it when Dream was direct.

Apparently, not that night.

"It's not uptight to turn you down."

"You're just as into me as I am into you," Dream said, "And don't you dare deny it."

"I'm not denying it," George said tightly, and Dream's heart leaped, before: "But I'm not letting

this happen.”

“George—”

“You’re my employee,” George snapped, “And I’m not going to kiss you, no matter how much you beg for it.” He didn’t wait for a response before turning around, beckoning with one hand. “It’s time to get back to the dinner.”

Dream stared after him, heart in his throat. It took George only a few steps to realize that Dream was still standing there, back against the pillar, motionless.

“Come,” George said impatiently, and Dream forced himself into motion.

The rest of the night passed in brightly colored flashes that Dream barely registered: a woman’s surgically whitened, smiling teeth, an elaborate boa made from peacock feathers, the golden bubbles rising from a crystal champagne flute, the sickly sweet taste of peach in his mouth from an appetizer, the elegant, red-painted nails of the harpist in the corner. Dream tried desperately to read into George’s body language to see if there was any chance of things improving. For as long as he tried, he couldn’t tell what George was thinking.

The limousine was deathly silent when Dream entered, right on George’s heels. The chauffeur took the familiar path back to Dream’s neighborhood, and the entire time, Dream tried to remember how to breath. George was so evidently upset, now that they were alone together and not surrounded by thousands of bright, shining socialites. He looked at the velveted floor of the limousine and counted the seconds in between his breaths.

George wouldn’t even look at him.

His apartment building approached, and the car pulled to a stop. Dream found his voice and asked, “I’ll see you next week, then.”

It was less a statement and more a question. George hummed, not looking up from his phone.

“We’ll see.”

Dream’s stomach twisted, and he fought to remain neutral as he stepped from the car.

“You’ll receive your payment in a few days,” George continued. Detached.

The door closed before Dream had a chance to respond, and the car pulled from the curb. Dream waited until it was completely out of sight before sinking down, hands grabbing at his hair futilely. Fuck. His heart wouldn’t slow down. He should have just— he should— he shouldn’t have said— *why hadn’t he—*

Gravel dug into his knees and Dream fought to take a deep breath. He felt suffocated. No matter how much he tried, he couldn’t get enough air into his lungs.

He stayed there, feet in the gutter, hands clutching his head, long after his street had gone silent.

Two days later, George’s email came through: *event in Los Angeles. flight is Thursday night from Orlando, return flight is Sunday afternoon. flat rate is same as usual with five percent increase, all*

food and clothes will be provided.

Dream read the message once, then twice, and then a third to allow the words to sink in.

He responded, *I'm available.*

The next email was flight tickets.

Dream boarded the private jet in cool silence and picked a seat near the back, next to the window. He had been alone on one of the flights before, but this time, George was already lounging in one of the seats, computer on his lap and window open. Bright sunlight poured in through the oval plane windows, highlighting the dust particles floating through the air. Dream set his duffel bag by his seat and unzipped it, searching for the book he had brought. There wasn't much else to do; he hadn't brought his computer, because he still needed to get his fixed and although he had the money now, he had been procrastinating doing so. So he settled into his seat, did his best not to stare at George, and tried to focus on the book in his hands. He was painfully aware of George's presence. It was overwhelming. It was so, so magnetic.

"What are you reading?"

"*Canterbury Tales*," Dream said. It wasn't his favorite book, but it had been part of his English major at college before he had left, and he had never really gotten the chance to finish it.

"I've never read it."

"It's not very interesting," Dream said. "You don't have to."

"Hm."

George turned his attention back to his computer. "I'll keep that in mind."

There was silence the rest of the flight. At one point, Dream fell asleep. His dreams were shapeless images and emotions that twisted around each other in various colors and sizes. He couldn't place a single memory to it when he woke up, right as the plane landed smoothly on the tarmac. Slowly, Dream peeled himself from the cushions, rubbed at his eyes until the sleep left them fully. George, who evidently hadn't slept, closed his computer with a satisfying click, and then pushed himself up from the seat too.

Los Angeles, Dream learned upon exiting the jet, was hot.

At least during the day it was. In the late afternoon, when George prompted Dream to get dressed, it had cooled down slightly, enough that Dream didn't feel uncomfortably sticky in the suit that George gave him. This one was a cool, deep green, lined with a satiny interior that was smooth to the touch. It brought out the green in his eyes and highlighted the blond of his hair. George was in a suit not identical to Dream's, but with enough similarities that the two complimented each other perfectly.

The first two hours, Dream was indifferent to.

At the start of the third hour, once George took them outside to breathe, Dream seized his chance.

Nothing had visibly changed between them, but it was painfully obvious that George was holding himself back in a sense. He hadn't laughed at a single one of Dream's comments that night, and had been polite and distant the entire time. The thought had been brewing in Dream's mind, spinning in circles like autumn leaves in the wind, and it only took ten minutes of panicked thinking before Dream finally spoke.

"George," Dream began, somewhat uncertainly, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Hm."

"About last time."

There was low, painful silence, before George said, "Go on."

Dream looked at him and tried to read him. He wished he knew George better; Dream could tell that if they knew each other well, George would be an open book.

"I know we have a... thing," Dream said carefully, "And I know that I like you. And I know that you like me too."

George didn't say anything, but gave a small wave. *Go on.*

"So if I wanted a relationship, would you want one too?"

Dream held his breath as the last few words escaped him, and tried to curb the frantic racing in his chest. George looked completely blank.

Finally, after a long period of waiting, George said slowly, "I'm not going to kiss you while you're working for me."

Dream nodded mutely.

"It's not going to happen."

He nodded again.

"It's a power dynamic that I don't want to have between us."

Reflexively, Dream said, "Such a saint, aren't you?"

"If you want a relationship, I'll draw up the termination papers," George continued, "But otherwise it's not going to happen."

Dream froze.

Termination?

"That's not fair," Dream rushed, "You can't just—"

"What?" George said. "What can't I do?"

Dream snapped his mouth shut and didn't respond.

"Go on, tell me," George prompted. "What can't I do?"

"You can't fire me because I want a relationship," Dream said. "That's not fair."

“Exactly,” George said. “I don’t want to fire you. But this is your choice.”

Unbelievably, Dream laughed. It was bitter and harsh. “My choice?”

“Yes,” George said, as if it were that simple, as if—

“You can’t just make this my choice,” Dream said, and he could feel his heart speeding up, pounding loudly through his ears, “You can’t.”

He knew he sounded emotional, irrational, and evidently George knew it too, because he pressed two fingers to his temples.

“Christ,” he muttered, “I knew I shouldn’t have—”

“You sought *me* out!” Dream said. “You can’t flip this on me when you’re the one who hired me in the first place?”

“But this wasn’t supposed to mean anything,” George snapped. “You and I, it wasn’t supposed to be anything.”

“But it is.”

“I know.”

“I don’t understand why you won’t just let it happen—”

“Dream,” George said coldly, with the preciseness of a taciturn businessman who was calculating enough to get out of every situation, “Look at this rationally. I’m self-aware enough to know that this job is your main source of income. So, say we do get together. Then say we have a messy breakup. Do you really think that you’ll be able to continue without me?”

Dream’s stomach bottomed out.

At once, his hurt transformed into a raging, boiling anger. How dare George hold his financial security over his head like that? How dare he— how dare he practically blackmail Dream, how *dare he*—

“You’re heartless,” Dream said. “You’ve had everything handed to you on a silver platter your entire life. You have no idea what it’s like for the rest of us.”

“I worked hard for what I have,” George said coolly. “I didn’t get here by doing nothing. By playing it easy.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Dream sneered, “You got here by stealing other people’s hard work. The hardest part of your day is probably having to brush your own teeth— or do you pay someone to do that for you, too?”

“You have no idea what my life is like.”

“Obviously I don’t!” Dream exploded. “Because I’ll never be like you! I’ll never be enough, won’t I?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

George hardened his gaze. “What is it with you and antagonizing people? What do you get out of being angry and bitter all the time?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair!”

“I know that! I’m very aware of that! Do you think I enjoy doing this every time you drag me away from my life to be paraded around like some sort of— trophy boyfriend? Do you think I do this for *you* ?”

George stared at Dream. “I was under the impression, yes.”

Dream felt like crying. “Well, you thought wrong.”

“Then go,” George said coldly. “Go back to your job flipping burgers for minimum wage and struggling your way through life. I won’t stop you.”

Dream didn’t respond. He tried to wrangle everything writhing inside of him into something manageable. He wanted to say something, *anything*, but he feared that if he opened his mouth, he wouldn’t be able to speak, that his words would come out choked and pained.

“I depend on you for *everything*,” Dream said brokenly, “My rent, my food, my awful fucking debt, I would probably be homeless right now if it wasn’t for this stupid job. And God *forbid* there’s something for once in my life that I actually want, and you’re threatening to take everything away from me because— because what? Because I am ridiculously, stupidly attracted to you, even though I *hate* it, and— and—”

He quieted slightly. His throat clicked as he swallowed hard, and hoarsely, Dream said, “Because it’s not fair. It just isn’t.”

Slowly, George repeated, “Life isn’t fair.”

Dream stared at him for a long, long moment, and he felt like crying and screaming and running away, but instead of doing any of those things, Dream seized George’s face in both hands and kissed him.

For a moment, it was the two of them in the dark, Dream gripping onto George fiercely, scared to let him go, and George holding Dream just as close, pushing and pulling each other like two ends of a magnet. Dream felt as if he were on fire, set aflame from every place George touched him, blazing through the night sky like a comet. He never wanted to let go.

Then he stepped back, sucked in a deep, shuddering breath. Neither of them looked at each other. His shoulders were still warm from George’s phantom touch. He still felt the tingle of George’s lips on his.

Finally, George said, “The car will take you to the airport. You can go home from there.”

Then he turned and went back inside.

Dream did not turn to watch him leave.

The next email's subject line was *Termination Contract*.

Dream saw it in the morning when he woke, and something inside him broke off and died, the smallest piece of his soul.

The body of the email was cold and stark. *Please sign all documents and return to the sender.*

Dream pushed himself out of bed and went to open the window. The air conditioning unit was broken, and made a rattling, wheezing sound when Dream kicked it. The air didn't get any cooler.

He put his phone in his back pocket, laid back on his mattress, and stared at the ceiling until it blurred.

Dream headed directly to the back room and clocked in, painfully slow. He got a few looks from the people around him, people who recognized him but hadn't seen his face in many months, and one distinct glare from an old friend.

"Welcome back," she cooed, and slung an arm around his shoulders. "Glad to see you slumming it with us again."

"Thanks," Dream said, somewhat sourly, and pushed Sylvee off him.

She propped a hip against the employee lockers and watched as Dream racked his name for his old employee password to clock his hours. "So, did your rich boyfriend dump you or something?"

"He wasn't my boyfriend."

"Just a sugar daddy, then."

"He wasn't my sugar daddy, either."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Well, he certainly wasn't getting any *sugar* from it," Dream said pointedly.

"You didn't put out?"

Dream glared. "I have standards."

Sylvee hummed, and hip checked Dream as she moved past him. "Whatever you say."

Dream stared at his locker, face quite red, and attempted to blank his mind out. He didn't remember the numbers for the combination, but muscle memory saved him anyway. In went his backpack and water bottle, and Dream closed it shut and remembered too late that he had the shitty locker that was broken half the time and shouldn't be shut fully. Fuck. At least he had all his essentials on him; he had broken into the locker before, he could do it again.

"Any big changes in leadership?" Dream said.

"Old manager Sarah left, new manager Brian is in charge." Sylvee tossed a black apron at Dream with more force than was strictly necessary. "Brian is nice but a stickler for being on time. Also,

there's this couple that shows up at table six sometimes, so avoid them. The lady will find anything wrong with her dish and send it back no matter what."

"Wonderful," Dream muttered. He unfurled the apron and tied it around his waist. Slowly, he felt himself settle back into his old, normal life. Just how things were before. He would have to get used to working fifty hours a week again. No more sitting around comfortably. No more counting on the next fat paycheck from absurdly rich men to fund his way through life.

Dream plastered on his best customer service smile, hated the way it made his cheeks ache, and headed to the front. He had the next five hours to meld into an entirely different personal.

This was manageable.

The coffee shop did not take him back.

Dream left, resume in hand, and tried to tell himself that it was what he had expected. He had been a shitty employee, dropping shifts and leaving without notice, and his manager's leniency only went so far. It made sense that they wouldn't have wanted him back.

Still, it hurt seeing the same people he recognized behind the counter, the people he had worked with for months on end. The way that some of them gave him a polite, yet distant, wave, and the way some looked straight past him as if he had never even existed in the first place.

Dream stared down the city street, picked a direction at random, and began walking.

The email came in the morning, two months later.

The subject line was *meeting times*.

The body read:

Hi Dream,

I was wondering if you're free sometime this weekend to grab a drink together. It would be nice to see you again.

George

Dream looked at it for a long moment. He read it once, then twice, and then shut his phone off and put it to the side.

His arms ached from a long double shift yesterday. He had spilled a customer's lemonade all over himself in the back room when he was preparing it, and had to work the next two hours sticky and cold. His back ached from standing for eight hours because his posture was so shit, and he could recall the angry, piercing screech of the woman from table six when he messed up her order the smallest bit. His ears were still ringing.

He needed to take a shower; the one last night hadn't been enough to sate his exhaustion. His phone stayed on his bed, and Dream swallowed two aspirin dry before heading to the bathroom. The water was hot and worked the knots out from his back slowly, until Dream felt loose and droopy from the thick steam. He breathed it in like soup into his lungs and imagined that it was cleansing him from the inside out.

He brushed his teeth. Washed his face. Put on deodorant. Remembered to floss, which he had been forgetting recently. Wiped the condensation from the mirror. Stared at himself for a long, long moment. Thought about the email that was waiting to be responded to. How long was too long? It had been sent two hours ago, though George must have known that at five in the morning, Dream would be asleep. Was he in a different timezone? Or had he been up early thinking about Dream? How long had it taken him to send that email?

Dream blinked, realized he had been standing still, zoned out looking at a tile in the bathroom for too long, and went to go make himself breakfast. He needed to go grocery shopping soon— his fridge was nearly empty but for a half-empty quart of milk, a carton of six eggs, a stick of butter and a gallon of caffeinated Arizona tea that he chugged before going to work each morning. His paycheck from the restaurant would be coming in on Friday, and Dream could work out time to head to the supermarket then.

Most of the money from George— from his previous job had gone straight into a three year CD for investment and wouldn't be touched until those years were up. Dream would never make that much money again in his life, and he wanted to save as much as he could before he began struggling. For now he was surviving off of biweekly paychecks and the barest skimmings of his previous funds.

He popped two slices of bread into the toaster and looked at his phone again. *It would be nice to see you again.* Would it?

Dream thought about it all through breakfast, all through his free morning, and all throughout his afternoon shift. Surely George knew that he had to have seen it by then. What was George thinking on the other end of the line? Was he pacing and waiting for a response? Was he just as eager as Dream was?

The decision had been made, Dream knew, before he even decided to think about it.

So the second he locked up, Dream sent back, *I'm free Sunday.*

There, he thought. At least one way or another, things would end then.

Dream arrived fifteen minutes early. He hadn't been sure what to wear, because before, with George, he had only ever worn state of the art designer brands. At last he had settled on the simplest pair of black jeans that he had, and a plain shirt. It was cool enough outside that he brought along a jacket, too, although combined with nerves and the way Dream was always awfully flustered around George, he wasn't entirely sure he would need it.

He took a seat in the coffee shop, in a back corner, and looked out the window for George's familiar figure approaching. Dream desperately hoped that he wouldn't show up in some sort of Mercedes-Benz or anything like that. He wanted this to not be George Reynolds and his paid

accompaniment. He wanted their conversation to simply be George and Dream.

He was so busy looking for George that he hadn't even realized he had spaced out, completely unaware of his surroundings, until there was a slight knock on the table in front of him, jolting him back into awareness, and there he was.

George. Just as Dream remembered him— same haircut, only slightly shorter, with more wave to it, same build, same small smile that was somehow more *real*, same eyes that turned to honey in the sunlight.

“Hi,” George said.

“Hi,” Dream said. He gestured. “You can sit down, you know.”

“I know,” George said, and took a seat.

They stared at each other for a long moment across the table, and unable to bear the suffocation of it all, Dream said, “Do you want to order something to drink?”

“Just an iced coffee would be fine,” George said. “I can go and order for us.”

“I can get it,” Dream said, and ignored the way George protested slightly at that, before sitting back down. Dream went to the front and ordered something for himself— he didn't remember at all what he said, but when the drinks arrived back at the table, Dream found himself with an iced latte. He took a slow sip and abruptly remembered why he hated the taste of coffee.

“So,” Dream said, because the tension in the air was thick enough to be tangible, “Why are you here?”

George clasped both hands around his glass. “I wanted to say hello.”

“Somehow I doubt that's it.” Dream knew it was probably unfair of him to be so aggressive, but that piece of his soul was still aching and angry and desperately hurt, and Dream didn't want to pull any punches. “What, did your latest boytoy not live up to expectations? Do you need someone else to come along to all your events? Am I just your last resort again?”

“You're not my last resort,” George said, taken aback by the strength of Dream's words, “You were never my last resort.”

“So what?” Dream said. “Wanting to drag me along again? Is that it?”

“No,” George said, almost fumbling for words, “I wanted to come back.”

“Come back,” Dream repeated.

“To you,” George said. “If you would have me.”

Everything in Dream's body went perfectly still— his lungs held their breath, his heart skipped a beat, his fingers stilled from tapping at his side, even the outside world faded to a vague blur before Dream came back to the present.

“What?” he managed.

“I would be willing to work things out,” George said, a tad desperate, “If you're willing to do that too.”

Work things out? As in—

“What does that even mean?” Dream said. “Work things out? Are you saying you want a relationship?”

George looked very quiet, and very far from the frigid, detached person he had been when Dream had last seen. “If you would want one, yes.”

“If I—” Dream ran a hand through his hair, put both hands to his face, “If *I* would want one?”

“Well, yes,” George said. A faint laugh. “Relationships go both ways, don’t they?”

Dream stared down at the foam in his latte. “You’re impossible.”

George opened his mouth, like he wanted to say something, and closed it again.

Dream, voice shaking, continued, “You’re ridiculous. You throw a fit like a toddler about dating me and then come back two months later just to ask for it again? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t throw a fit,” George said sullenly.

“Yes, you did. You absolutely did.” Dream’s knee started bouncing under the table, up and down, like a toy a child had wound all the way up. “God, you’re awful. It’s been so long, it’s been months, and you come back just to tell me that you want to get with me? After everything?”

“I know how it sounds,” George said quietly. “Believe me, I do. But I want you to know, you’ve been on my mind, all the time, and what I said wasn’t fair, I never should have said that to you, and I’m so sorry—”

“Wonderful,” Dream said sardonically. “Finally, an apology.”

“I should have apologized a long time ago,” George said. “I know.”

Dream shook his head. “A *sorry* doesn’t cut it now.”

“I know,” George repeated. “I really do.”

“And I hate you,” Dream said, voice shaking slightly, “I hate you so much.”

George swallowed. “I know.”

“No, you don’t.” Bizarrely, Dream wanted to laugh. “I hate you because I’ll never be able to say no to you as long as I live. I’ll never be able to turn you down. I hate you because you’re the worst person I’ve ever met, and somehow also the best, and I don’t know what I’d ever do without you. I hate you for that.”

George didn’t say anything. Dream blinked, realized his eyes were wet, blinked a few more times, until he was very certain that they were dry and that his voice wasn’t thick and unsteady. He risked a glance at George, who was sitting there, looking at Dream as if he had never seen him before in his life.

“I hate that I do want it,” Dream said. “I want you.”

Even admitting it out loud, Dream knew it was the truth.

He took a sip of his drink to try and hide how much his hands were shaking. Dream looked down, at the table, out the window, anywhere but George, because if he looked at George's slightly hopeful expression Dream thought he would lose it.

George's voice was quiet. "So what do we do now?"

A million things. A million ways. A million times, over and over again.

"I'll take you on a date," Dream said. "A normal one. That doesn't involve million dollar outfits or elaborate parties or talking to a bunch of people we don't care about."

"That would be nice."

"And you can come back to my place. I can show you around."

"That would also be nice."

"And you can pay for my student debt."

George blinked. "If you really wanted me to—"

"I was joking," Dream said, almost laughing, because it was so typical of their early conversations. Slotting right back into place. "You can start by paying for our drinks."

George smiled, hesitantly and slow, testing the waters, and Dream found himself smiling back.

It would take time, and patience.

But they would figure it out, one way or another.

End Notes

if you enjoyed please leave kudos or comments, they mean the world to me and i love hearing what u all think!! <3

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